

Analysis of Various Methods of Meditation In Buddhist Schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhist meditation refers to the meditative practices associated with the religion and philosophy of Buddhism.

Core meditation techniques have been preserved in ancient Buddhist texts and have proliferated and diversified through teacher-student transmissions. Buddhists pursue meditation as part of the path toward Enlightenment and Nirvana¹. The closest words for meditation in the classical languages of Buddhism are *bhāvanā* and *jhāna*.² Buddhist meditation techniques have become increasingly popular in the wider world, with many non-Buddhists taking them up for a variety of reasons.

Buddhist meditation encompasses a variety of meditation techniques that aim to

¹ For instance, Kamalashila (2003), p. 4, states that Buddhist meditation “includes any method of meditation that has Enlightenment as its ultimate aim.” Likewise, Bodhi (1999) writes: “To arrive at the experiential realization of the truths it is necessary to take up the practice of meditation.... At the climax of such contemplation the mental eye ... shifts its focus to the unconditioned state, Nibbana....” A similar although in some ways slightly broader definition is provided by Fischer-Schreiber et al. (1991), p. 142: “Meditation – general term for a multitude of religious practices, often quite different in method, but all having the same goal: to bring the consciousness of the practitioner to a state in which he can come to an experience of ‘awakening,’ ‘liberation,’ ‘enlightenment.’” Kamalashila (2003) further allows that some Buddhist meditations are “of a more preparatory nature” (p. 4).

² There is the cultivation of meditative and contemplative techniques aimed at producing what might, for the lack of a suitable technical term in English, be referred to as ‘altered states of consciousness’. In the technical vocabulary of Indian religious texts such states come to be termed ‘meditations’ ([Skt.:] *dhyāna* / [Pali:] *jhāna*) or ‘concentrations’ (*samādhi*); the attainment of such states of consciousness was generally regarded as bringing the practitioner to deeper knowledge and experience of the nature of the world.” (Gethin, 1998, p. 10).

develop mindfulness, concentration, supramundane powers, tranquility, and insight. Given the large number and diversity of traditional Buddhist meditation practices, this article primarily identifies authoritative contextual frameworks — both contemporary and canonical — for the variety of practices.

While there are some similar meditative practices — such as breath meditation and various recollections (*anussati*) — that are used across Buddhist schools, there is also significant diversity. In the Theravāda tradition alone, there are over fifty methods for developing mindfulness and forty for developing concentration, while in the Tibetan tradition there are thousands of visualization meditations.³ Most classical and contemporary Buddhist meditation guides are school specific.⁴ Only a few teachers attempt to synthesize, crystallize and categorize practices from multiple Buddhist traditions.

II. CONTENT

1. Meditation in early Buddhism

The earliest tradition of Buddhist practice is preserved in the *nikāya*, and is adhered to by the Theravāda lineage. It was also the focus of the other now-extinct early Buddhist schools, and has been incorporated to greater and lesser degrees into the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and many East Asian Mahāyāna traditions.

1.1. Types of meditation

³ While there are some similar meditative practices — such as breath meditation and various recollections (*anussati*) — that are used across Buddhist schools, there is also significant diversity. In the Theravāda tradition alone, there are over fifty methods for developing mindfulness and forty for developing concentration, while in the Tibetan tradition there are thousands of visualization meditations. Most classical and contemporary Buddhist meditation guides are school specific. Only a few teachers attempt to synthesize, crystallize and categorize practices from multiple Buddhist traditions.

⁴ Examples of contemporary school-specific “classics” include, from the Theravada tradition, Nyanaponika (1996) and, from the Zen tradition, Kapleau (1989).

In terms of early traditions as found in the vast Pali canon and the Āgamas, meditation can be contextualized as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, explicitly in regard to:

Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*): exemplified by the Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness (see *Satipatthana Sutta*).

Right Concentration (*samma samadhi*): culminating in jhanic absorptions through the meditative development of *samatha*.

Right View (*samma ditthi*): embodying wisdom traditionally attained through the meditative development of *vipassana* founded on *samatha*.

1.2. Four foundations for mindfulness

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha identifies four foundations for mindfulness: the body, feelings, mind states and mental objects. He further enumerates the following objects as bases for the meditative development of mindfulness:

Body (*kāyā*): Breathing (see *Anapanasati Sutta*), Postures, Clear Comprehending, Reflections on Repulsiveness of the Body, Reflections on Material Elements, Cemetery Contemplations

Feelings (*vedanā*), whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Mind (*cittā*):

Mental Contents (*dhammā*): Hindrances, Aggregates, Sense-Bases, Factors of Enlightenment, and the Four Noble Truths.⁵

1.3. Serenity and insight

The Buddha is said to have identified two paramount mental qualities that arise from wholesome meditative practice:

- "serenity" or "tranquillity" (Pali: *samatha*) which steadies, composes, unifies and concentrates the mind;
- "insight" (Pali: *vipassana*) which enables one to see, explore and discern "formations" (conditioned phenomena based on the five aggregates)⁶.

Through the meditative development of serenity, one is able to suppress obscuring hindrances; and, with the suppression of the hindrances, it is through the meditative development of insight that one gains liberating wisdom. Moreover, the Buddha is said to have extolled serenity and insight as conduits for attaining *Nibbana* (Pali; Skt.: *Nirvana*), the unconditioned state as in the "*Kimsuka Tree Sutta*"

(SN 35.245), where the Buddha provides an elaborate metaphor in which serenity and insight are "the swift pair of messengers" who deliver the message of *Nibbana* via the Noble Eightfold Path.⁷

In the "*Four Ways to Arahantship Sutta*" (AN 4.170), Ven. Ananda reports that people attain arahantship using serenity and insight in one of three ways: "*they develop serenity and then insight. They develop insight and then serenity. While the Nikayas identify that the pursuit of vipassana can precede the pursuit of samatha, a fruitful vipassana-oriented practice must still be based upon the achievement of stabilizing "access concentration". They develop serenity and insight in tandem (Pali: samatha-vipassanam yuganaddham) as in, for instance, obtaining the first jhana, and then seeing in the associated aggregates the three marks of existence, before proceeding to the second jhana*".⁸

In the Pali canon, the Buddha never mentions independent *samatha* and *vipassana* meditation practices; instead, *samatha* and *vipassana* are two qualities of mind to be developed through meditation.⁹ Nonetheless, some meditation practices (such as contemplation of a *kasina* object) favor the development of *samatha*, others are conducive to the development of *vipassana* (such as contemplation of the aggregates), while others (such as mindfulness of breathing) are classically used for developing both mental qualities.

1.4. Kammatthana

Buddhaghosa's forty meditation subjects are described in the *Visuddhimagga*. Almost all of

⁵ For instance, see Solé-Leris (1986), p. 75; and, Goldstein (2003), p. 92.

⁶ These definitions of *samatha* and *vipassana* are based on the "*Four Kinds of Persons Sutta*" (AN 4.94). This article's text is primarily based on Bodhi (2005), pp. 269-70, 440 n. 13. See also Thanissaro (1998d).

⁷ Bodhi (2000), pp. 1251-53. See also Thanissaro (1998c) (where this *sutta* is identified as SN 35.204). See also, for instance, a discourse (Pali: *sutta*) entitled, "*Serenity and Insight*" (SN 43.2), where the Buddha states: "And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Serenity and insight..." (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1372-73).

⁸ Bodhi (2005), pp. 268, 439 nn. 7, 9, 10. See also Thanissaro (1998f).

⁹ See Thanissaro (1997) where for instance he underlines: When [the Pali discourses] depict the Buddha telling his disciples to go meditate, they never quote him as saying 'go do *vipassana*,' but always 'go do *jhana*.' And they never equate the word *vipassana* with any mindfulness techniques. In the few instances where they do mention *vipassana*, they almost always pair it with *samatha* — not as two alternative methods, but as two qualities of mind that a person may 'gain' or 'be endowed with,' and that should be developed together.

these are described in the early texts.¹⁰ Buddhaghosa advises that, for the purpose of developing concentration and “consciousness,” a person should “apprehend from among the forty meditation subjects one that suits his own temperament” with the advice of a “good friend” (kalyana mitta) who is knowledgeable in the different meditation subjects (Ch. III, § 28).¹¹ Buddhaghosa subsequently elaborates on the forty meditation subjects as follows (Ch. III, §104; Chs. IV - XI):¹²

1. Ten kasinas: earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, and “limited-space”.
2. Ten kinds of foulness: “the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut-up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, and a skeleton”.
3. Ten recollections: the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, the virtues of deities, death (see Upajjhathana Sutta), the body, the breath (see anapanasati), and peace.
4. Four divine abodes: metta, karuṇā, mudita, and upekkha.
5. Four immaterial states: boundless space, boundless perception, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception.
6. One perception (of “repulsiveness in nutriment”).
7. One “defining” (that is, the four elements).

When one overlays Buddhaghosa's 40 meditative subjects for the development of concentration with the Buddha's foundations of mindfulness, three practices are found to be in common: breath meditation, foulness meditation (which is similar to the Sattipatthana Sutta's cemetery contemplations, and to contemplation of bodily repulsiveness), and contemplation of the four elements. According to Pali commentaries, breath meditation can lead one to the equanimous fourth jhanic absorption. Contemplation of foulness can lead to the attainment of the first jhana, and contemplation of the four elements culminates in pre-jhana access concentration.¹³

¹⁰ Sarah Shaw, *Buddhist meditation: an anthology of texts from the Pāli canon*. Routledge, 2006, pages 6-8. A Jataka tale gives a list of 38 of them.

¹¹ Buddhaghosa & Nanamoli (1999), pp. 85, 90.

¹² Buddhaghosa & Nanamoli (1999), p. 110.

¹³ Regarding the jhanic attainments that are possible with different meditation techniques, see Gunaratana (1988).

1.5. In Contemporary Theravāda

Particularly influential from the twentieth century onward has been the “New Burmese Method” or “Vipassana School” approach to samatha and vipassana developed by Mingun Jetavana Sayādaw and U Nārada and popularized by Mahasi Sayadaw. Here samatha is considered an optional but not necessary component of the practice—vipassana is possible without it. Another Burmese method, derived from Ledi Sayadaw via U Ba Khin and S. N. Goenka, takes a similar approach. Other Burmese traditions popularized in the west, notably that of Pa Auk Sayadaw, uphold the emphasis on samatha explicit in the commentarial tradition of the Visuddhimagga.

Also influential is the Thai Forest Tradition deriving from Ajahn Mun and popularized by Ajahn Chah, which, in contrast, stresses the inseparability of the two practices, and the essential necessity of both practices. Other noted practitioners in this tradition include Ajahn Thate and Ajahn Maha Bua, among others.¹⁴

2. Meditation in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Mahāyāna Buddhism includes numerous schools of practice, which each draw upon various Buddhist sūtras, philosophical treatises, and commentaries. Accordingly, each school has its own meditation methods for the purpose of developing samādhi and prajñā, with the goal of ultimately attaining enlightenment. Nevertheless, each has its own emphasis, mode of expression, and philosophical outlook. In his classic book on meditation of the various Chinese Buddhist traditions, Charles Luk writes, “The Buddha Dharma is useless if it is not put into actual practice, because if we do not have personal experience of it, it will be alien to us and we will never awaken to it in spite of our book learning.”¹⁵ Venerable Nan Huaijin echoes similar sentiments about the importance of meditation by remarking, “Intellectual reasoning is just another spinning of the sixth consciousness, whereas the practice of meditation is the true entry into the Dharma.”¹⁶

2.1. Meditation in the Pure Land school

2.1.1. Mindfulness of Amitābha Buddha

In the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism, repeating the name of Amitābha Buddha is traditionally a form of Mindfulness of the Buddha (Skt. buddhānusrīti). This term was translated into Chinese as nianfo (念佛), by which it is popularly

¹⁴ Tiyavanich K. *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand*. University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

¹⁵ Luk, Charles. *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*. 1964. p. 11.

¹⁶ Nan, Huai-Chin. *To Realize Enlightenment: Practice of the Cultivation Path*. 1994. p. 1.

known in English. The practice is described as calling the buddha to mind by repeating his name, to enable the practitioner to bring all his or her attention upon that buddha (samādhi).¹⁷ This may be done vocally or mentally, and with or without the use of Buddhist prayer beads. Those who practice this method often commit to a fixed set of repetitions per day, often from 50,000 to over 500,000. According to tradition, the second patriarch of the Pure Land school, Shandao, is said to have practiced this day and night without interruption, each time emitting light from his mouth. Therefore he was bestowed with the title “Great Master of Light” (大師光明) by the Tang Dynasty emperor Gao Zong (高宗).¹⁸

In addition, in Chinese Buddhism there is a related practice called the “dual path of Chán and Pure Land cultivation”, which is also called the “dual path of emptiness and existence.”¹⁹ As taught by Venerable Nan Huaijin, the name of Amitābha Buddha is recited slowly, and the mind is emptied out after each repetition. When idle thoughts arise, the phrase is repeated again to clear them. With constant practice, the mind is able to remain peacefully in emptiness, culminating in the attainment of samādhi.²⁰

2.1.2. Pure Land Rebirth Dhāraṇī

Repeating the Pure Land Rebirth Dhāraṇī is another method in Pure Land Buddhism. Similar to the mindfulness practice of repeating the name of Amitābha Buddha, this dhāraṇī is another method of meditation and recitation in Pure Land Buddhism. The repetition of this dhāraṇī is said to be very popular among traditional Chinese Buddhists.²¹ It is traditionally preserved in Sanskrit, and it is said that when a devotee succeeds in realizing singleness of mind by repeating a mantra, its true and profound meaning will be clearly revealed.²²

2.1.3. Visualization methods

Another practice found in Pure Land Buddhism is meditative contemplation and visualization of Amitābha Buddha, his attendant bodhisattvas, and the Pure Land. The basis of this is found in the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* (“Amitābha Meditation Sūtra”), in which the Buddha describes to Queen Vaidehi the practices of thirteen

progressive visualization methods, corresponding to the attainment of various levels of rebirth in the Pure Land.²³ Visualization practises for Amitābha are popular among esoteric Buddhist sects, such as Japanese Shingon Buddhism.

2.2. Meditation in the Zen school

2.2.1. Pointing to the nature of the mind

In the earliest traditions of Zen Buddhism, it is said that there was no formal method of meditation. Instead, the teacher would use various didactic methods to point to the true nature of the mind, also known as *Buddha-nature*. This method is referred to as the “Mind Dharma”, and exemplified in the story of Śākyamuni Buddha holding up a flower silently, and Mahākāśyapa smiling as he understood.²⁴ A traditional formula of this is, “Chán points directly to the human mind, to enable people to see their true nature and become buddhas.”²⁵ In the early era of the Chán school, there was no fixed method or formula for teaching meditation, and all instructions were simply heuristic methods; therefore the Chán school was called the “Gateless Gate.”²⁶

2.2.2. Contemplating meditation cases

It is said traditionally that when the minds of people in society became more complicated and when they could not make progress so easily, the masters of the Chán school were forced to change their methods.²⁷ These involved particular words and phrases, shouts, roars of laughter, sighs, gestures, or blows from a staff. These were all meant to awaken the student to the essential truth of the mind, and were later called *gōng'àn* (公案), or *kōan* in Japanese.²⁸

These didactic phrases and methods were to be contemplated, and example of such a device is a phrase that turns around the practice of mindfulness: “Who is being mindful of the Buddha?”²⁹ The teachers all instructed their students to give rise to a gentle feeling of doubt at all times while practicing, so as to strip the mind of seeing, hearing, feeling, and knowing, and ensure its constant rest and undisturbed condition.³⁰ Charles Luk explains the essential function of contemplating such a meditation case with doubt:

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.44.

²⁵ Nan, Huai-Chin. *Basic Buddhism: Exploring Buddhism and Zen*. 1997. p. 92.

²⁶ Yuan, Margaret. *Grass Mountain: A Seven Day Intensive in Ch'an Training with Master Nan Huai-Chin*. 1986. p. 2.

²⁷ Luk, Charles. *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*. 1964. p. 45.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.49.

¹⁷ Luk, Charles. *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*. 1964. p. 83.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.84.

²⁰ Yuan, Margaret. *Grass Mountain: A Seven Day Intensive in Ch'an Training with Master Nan Huai-Chin*. 1986. p. 55.

²¹ Luk, Charles. *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*. 1964. p. 84

²² *ibid.*

Since the student cannot stop all his thoughts at one stroke, he is taught to use this poison-against-poison device to realize singleness of thought, which is fundamentally wrong but will disappear when it falls into disuse, and gives way to singleness of mind, which is a precondition of the realization of the self-mind for the perception of self-nature and attainment of Bodhi.³¹

2.3. Meditation in the Tiantai school

2.3.1. Tiantai śamatha-vipaśyanā

In China it has been traditionally held that the meditation methods used by the Tiantai school are the most systematic and comprehensive of all.³² In addition to its doctrinal basis in Indian Buddhist texts, the Tiantai school also emphasizes use of its own meditation texts which emphasize the principles of śamatha and vipaśyanā. Of these texts, Zhiyi's *Concise Śamatha-vipaśyanā* (小止觀), *Mahā-śamatha-vipaśyanā* (摩訶止觀), and *Six Subtle Dharma Gates* (六妙法門) are the most widely read in China. Rujun Wu identifies the work *Mahā-śamatha-vipaśyanā* of Zhiyi as the seminal meditation text of the Tiantai school.³³

Regarding the functions of śamatha and vipaśyanā in meditation, Zhiyi writes in his work *Concise Śamatha-vipaśyanā*: The attainment of Nirvāṇa is realizable by many methods whose essentials do not go beyond the practice of śamatha and vipaśyanā. Śamatha is the first step to untie all bonds and vipaśyanā is essential to root out delusion. Śamatha provides nourishment for the preservation of the knowing mind, and vipaśyanā is the skillful art of promoting spiritual understanding. Śamatha is the unsurpassed cause of samādhi, while vipaśyanā begets wisdom.

The Tiantai school also places a great emphasis on ānāpānasmṛti, or mindfulness of breathing, in accordance with the principles of śamatha and vipaśyanā. Zhiyi classifies breathing into four main categories: panting (喘), unhurried breathing (風), deep and quiet breathing (氣), and stillness or rest (息). Zhiyi holds that the first three kinds of breathing are incorrect, while the fourth is correct, and that the breathing should reach stillness and rest.³⁴

2.3.2. Esoteric practices in Japan

One of the adaptations by the Japanese Tendai (Ch. Tiantai) school was the introduction of esoteric practices (Mikkyo) into Tendai Buddhism,

which was later named *Taimitsu* by Ennin. Eventually, according to Tendai Taimitsu doctrine, the esoteric rituals came to be considered of equal importance with the exoteric teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, by chanting mantras, maintaining mudras, or performing certain meditations, one is able to see that the sense experiences are the teachings of Buddha, have faith that one is inherently an enlightened being, and one can attain enlightenment within this very body. The origins of Taimitsu are found in China, similar to the lineage that Kukai encountered in his visit to China during the Tang Dynasty, and Saicho's disciples were encouraged to study under Kukai.³⁵

3. Meditation in Vajrayana Buddhism

The aim of the teachings of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, each taught by the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages of Indo-Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhism, respectively, is to familiarize one with the ultimate nature of mind which underlies all existence, the Dharmakaya. Then, by meditating in union with the Dharmakaya, one gradually passes through each of the Ten Bhūmis until reaching liberation from Samsara and karma.

The shared preliminary practices of both the Nyingma and Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism are called ngondro, which involves visualization, mantra recitation and sadhana practice, and many prostrations.

III. CONCLUSION

Buddhist meditation takes many forms, but all of them are bhavana. Bhavana is an ancient discipline. It is based in part of the discipline of the historical Buddha, who lived more than twenty five centuries ago, and in part on even older forms of yoga.

Some Buddhists think it is incorrect to call bhavana "meditation." The Theravada monk and scholar Walpola Rahula wrote, "The word meditation is a very poor substitute for the original term *bhavana*, which means 'culture' or 'development', i.e., mental culture or mental development. The Buddhist *bhavana*, properly speaking, is mental culture in the full sense of the term. It aims at cleansing the mind of impurities and disturbances, such as lustful desires, hatred, ill-will, indolence, worries and restlessness, sceptical doubts, and cultivating such qualities as concentration, awareness, intelligence, will, energy, the analytical faculty, confidence, joy, tranquility, leading finally to the attainment of highest wisdom

³¹ *ibid*, p.110.

³² *ibid*, p. 111.

³³ Rujun Wu (1993). *T'ien-T'ai Buddhism and early Mādhyamika*. National Foreign Language Center Technical Reports. Buddhist studies program. University of Hawaii Press.

³⁴ Luk, Charles. *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*. 1964. p. 125.

³⁵ Abe, Ryuichi (1999). *The Weaving of Mantra: Kukai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse*. Columbia University Press. p. 45.

which sees the nature of things as they are, and realizes the Ultimate Truth, Nirvana.”³⁶

Walpola Rahula's definition ought to distinguish Buddhist meditation from many other practices that get lumped under the English word *meditation*. Buddhist meditation is not primarily about reducing stress, although it can do that. Nor is it about “blissing out” or having visions or out-of-body experiences.

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³⁶ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Grove Press, 1974), p. 68.